



Prepared By Foothills Regional Commission



FARMLAND PROTECTION PLAN

RUTHERFORD COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Acknowledgements

Prepared for the Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Rutherford County Farmland Preservation Advisory Board.

Prepared by:

Izzy Norman
Katelyn Smith
Alan Toney
Benjamin Bordeaux

Rutherford County Farmland Preservation Advisory Board:

John Tedder, Chairman
Ronald Hawkins, Vice Chairman
Albert Moore
Johnny Bradley
Guy Fagan
Harley Lattimore
Dayna Causby

Other Contributions Provided by:

Brandon Higgins, Rutherford County Soil and Water Resource Conservation Administrator
Kayla Upton, Rutherford County Soil and Water Admin / Education Specialist
N.C. Cooperative Extension, Rutherford County
Rutherford County Cattleman's Association
Rutherford County Farm Service Agency

The authors thank the Rutherford County Soil & Water Conservation District and the Rutherford County Farmland Preservation Advisory Board for their support and guidance. Special thanks are extended to the farmers, landowners, and concerned citizens in Rutherford County who participated in surveys, interviews, and meetings.

Table of Contents

04	Executive Summary
05	Introduction
06	Methodology
07	Importance of Agriculture in Rutherford County
08	State of Agriculture in Rutherford County
18	Producer Input to Farmland Preservation
24	Farmer Profiles
28	Challenges to Agriculture
30	Strengths and Opportunities for Agriculture
33	Farmland Protection Programs
39	Recommended Actions
48	Timeline for Implementation
50	Funding Opportunities
52	Appendices

Executive Summary

The Rutherford County Farmland Protection Plan was commissioned in September of 2022 by the Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District to meet the North Carolina state requirements for farmland protection plans. This plan analyzes the current state of farming in Rutherford County, identifies the primary challenges and opportunities for agriculture, and presents a set of recommendations to assist government leaders in preserving local agriculture. The assessment was made by compiling information from agricultural census reports, conducting a survey of Rutherford farmers, and by holding individual interviews with farmers, agribusinesses, and key stakeholders involved in agricultural-related activities.

The 2017 census found 59,921 acres of active farmland on 620 farms throughout the county. Farming occupies roughly 16.6 percent of the county's land base and can be found dispersed across the county, primarily outside of town limits. Primary farmland uses include forestry, hay, row crops, poultry, and cattle. Between 2007 and 2017 the number of farms declined by 12.3 percent, as a result, the amount of farmland decreased by 9 percent.

Despite the loss in farmland, agricultural production boomed and the market value of all agricultural products increased nearly sixfold. Livestock and poultry sales are the main economic driver of the agriculture industry; in fact, Rutherford had the second-highest livestock market value in 2017 in the 18-county region of Western NC. More specifically, broilers and layers are the most popular livestock in the county and produced roughly 83.8 percent of all farm sales in the county in 2017, equaling about \$38 million in sales. In terms of crop sales, hay and soybeans have the largest footprint, and combined contributed nearly \$2 million in sales in 2017. Other demographic and farm trends indicate that since 2007 more individuals are pursuing farming full-time than part-time; the median and average farm size has increased; and the number of producers and their average age has increased.

The main challenges to Rutherford County agriculture include profitability, infrastructure costs, labor supply, an aging farmer population, population growth and development, weak local markets, and a lack of agricultural support vendors. The primary strengths and opportunities of agriculture within Rutherford County include location, knowledgeable farmers, local government agencies, young farmers, and the local food movement and marketing channels.

To address the challenges and seize the opportunities, Rutherford County farmers and farms must be recognized as valuable assets and supported through political, economic, and social investment. This can occur by strengthening the agricultural economy, protecting farmland as a valuable resource, and fostering awareness and public support for agriculture.

Introduction

Agriculture is a key component of Rutherford County that contributes to the economic prosperity of both the local community and the region as a whole. Economic development within the county relies heavily on the success of farms and farm-related businesses that provide products, income, and employment. Agriculture also protects the county's soil, water resources, wildlife habitats, and scenic views that define Rutherford's rural character. Due to the varying benefits of agriculture, the promotion of the local agricultural industry and the protection of farmland is paramount to the success of the county.

Unfortunately, farmers in Rutherford County, as well as others throughout the United States, are struggling to make ends meet in a market that is plagued by high up-front costs and low wholesale prices. In addition to low or non-existent profits, farmers are facing challenges from sprawling developments encroaching on prime farmland, labor shortages, underperforming local markets, and an aging farmer population, all of which impede a grower's ability to operate a successful farm business. As a result, these challenges push farmers out of the agricultural industry and leave the future of farming hanging in the balance.

With the creation of this plan, the Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District, along with the Foothills Regional Commission, will present a set of actions and strategies to ensure a viable farming industry in the county. To accomplish this, an assessment of the agricultural industry in Rutherford County was made, and its challenges and opportunities were identified. The recommendations of this plan are intended to directly support the preservation of farmland while also strengthening the county's agricultural economic development and fostering greater support for the industry.



Methodology

This plan was informed by the perspectives of Rutherford County farmers and landowners through a survey instrument and one-on-one interviews. The Rutherford County Farmer Survey was created by the Foothills Regional Commission and reviewed by the Farmland Advisory Board. The survey, which was created on the online platform Survey Monkey, consisted of 24 questions related to farm operations in the county, obstacles and opportunities for agriculture, and the types of programs most in demand from the farming community. The survey opened on February 1st and closed on March 13th. It was shared online through various streams, including newsletters, websites, and Facebook pages, as well as distributed on paper at the Rutherford Cattleman's Association Annual dinner. A total of 33 individuals completed the survey. A link to the survey questions and results can be found in Appendix A.

To supplement the survey, six farmers and one agribusiness owner were interviewed. The interviewed farmers operate on various scales and represent a diverse array of crops, thereby providing well-rounded and informed perspectives. The farmers were asked a series of questions regarding current challenges, the efficiency of farmland preservation programs, and ways to support their operations. These questions can be found in Appendix B. The interview with the agribusiness owner focused on their unique challenges, their relationship with farmers, and ways to improve the agribusiness environment within Rutherford County. These questions are located in Appendix C. Additional information was gathered through conversations with stakeholders in the agriculture economy.

Statistical data was gathered from the Census of Agriculture, which is published every five years by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The census offers a count of farms and ranches across the U.S., specifically looking at land use and ownership, operator characteristics, production practices, income, and expenditures. The data is aggregated at the national, state, and county levels. This plan compares data on the county level from the 2007, 2012, and 2017 censuses. Data from the 2022 Census of Agriculture has not been released at the time this plan was formed.

A public input session was held on April 17th from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. at the Rutherford County Office Building. All public comments have been addressed.



Importance of Agriculture in Rutherford County

Rural Character & Heritage

Agriculture is a cornerstone of Rutherford County that enhances the area's economic prosperity while preserving its rural character. Agricultural enterprises and farmland bring not only monetary but also an intrinsic value to Rutherford County. Rural landscapes such as farmland and open spaces provide a connection to the history and foundation of the county's communities. Through these landscapes, people live in intricate relationships with the land that provide great importance and benefits to the local population. Rutherford County understands the importance of preserving its rural character while fostering a prosperous agricultural sector. To be successful in retaining these important assets, tools must be utilized to protect agriculture in the community. The encouragement and support of agribusinesses and agricultural-related activities are crucial in ensuring the preservation of farmland in Rutherford County and subsequently its rural character and heritage.

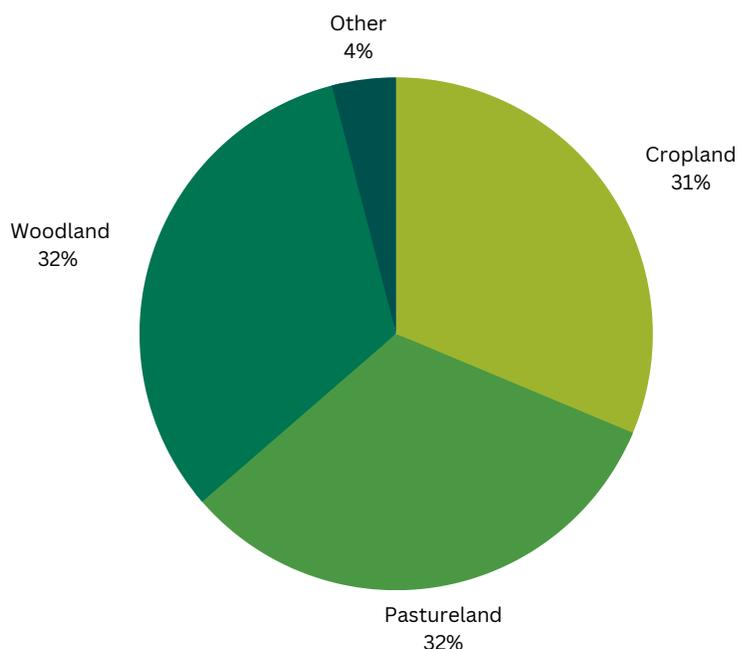
Ecological Benefits

Farm and forestland provide many environmental benefits to the public including stormwater retention and filtration, flood control, air filtration, and wildlife habitat. In the past, agriculture was a source of air and water pollution, but today farmers employ numerous Best Management Practices (BMPs) to protect soil, water, and air quality. Many farmers within Rutherford County focus on utilizing sustainable methods on their farms that protect natural resources and sustain the economic viability of their agriculture systems. This transition has proven to produce healthier crops along with improved yields. These regenerative practices also provide economic benefits and cost savings from the reduced use of chemicals, including fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and antibiotics. The benefits that sustainable agriculture provides promotes a more equitable system that focuses on the restoration and preservation of farmland for future generations.



State of Agriculture in Rutherford County

In 2017, Rutherford County had the third largest number of farms in the 18-county region of Western North Carolina. Rutherford County had 620 farms, trailing Buncombe County with 1,073 farms and Madison County with 639 farms. With regard to acreage, Rutherford County surpassed Madison County with 59,921 acres in farmland. Rutherford ranks second in the region in acreage, with Buncombe County remaining the leader with 72,284 acres.



In 2017, there were 59,921 acres of active farmland in Rutherford County. Farming utilizes approximately 16.6 percent of the county's 565-square-mile land base. The county's farmland is roughly divided into equal fractions of cropland (31%), pastureland (32%), and woodland (32%).

Figure 1. Distribution of Active Farmland in Rutherford County

Table 1 lists the top crop and livestock items produced in Rutherford County in 2017. Forage and soybeans are the leading crops in terms of land use, followed by corn and vegetables. Chickens, including broilers and layers, are the main livestock farmed in the county, followed by cattle.

Table 1. Top Agricultural Items by Quantity in 2017

Top Crop Items	Acres
Forage (hay/haylage)	10,520
Soybeans for beans	1,808
Corn for grain	390
Vegetables harvested, all	165
Top Livestock Items	Number
Broilers and other meat-type chickens	1,921,650
Layers	61,072
Cattle and calves	7,814
Horses and ponies	1,168
Goats	1,042

Figure 2 categorizes the type of land enrolled in the Present-Use Value (PUV) program within Rutherford County. In order for land to qualify for PUV, there are four general requirements revolving around ownership, minimum acreage, income, and sound management. These requirements are fairly easy to meet, and in tandem with significant financial benefits, the PUV program incentivizes landowners to enroll. With this in mind, this image reveals the immense presence of agricultural land, forestland, and horticultural land in Rutherford County.

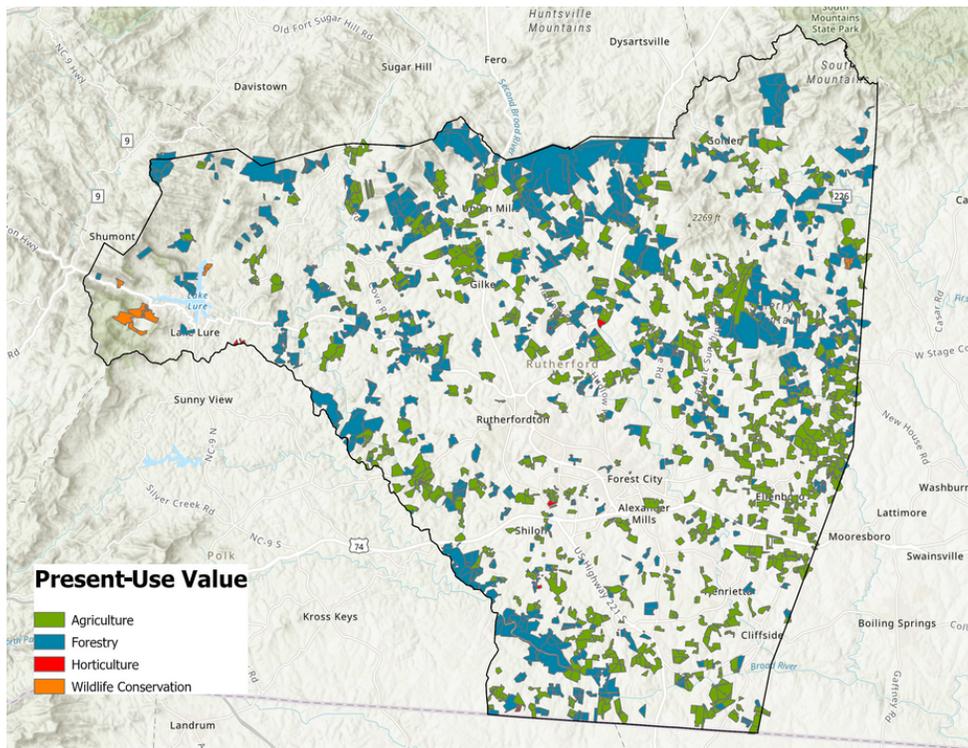


Figure 2. Type of Land Enrolled in PUV Within Rutherford County

Generally, land enrolled in the PUV program lies outside the town limits of Ruth, Rutherfordton, Spindale, and Forest City. To be certified as forestland, one tract of at least 20 acres must be actively engaged in the commercial growing of trees under a sound management program. In turn, there are large swaths of forestland in the Northern and Southwestern portions of the county. To retain the agricultural classification, there must be at least 10 acres of land actively engaged in the commercial production or growing of crops, plants, and/or animals under a sound management program. Plots of agricultural land are scattered throughout the county, with more concentrated pockets located along the Eastern half of the county near the Town of Ellenboro. Larger parcels of agricultural land can be found along the Western side of the county and to the North of the tri-cities. To obtain the horticulture classification, only five acres of land must be actively engaged in the commercial production or growing of fruits and vegetables or nursery and floral products. Within the county, there are only a few tracts of land classified as horticultural. The land near Lake Lure under wildlife conservation is identified as Chimney Rock State Park.

In total, there are 89,786.66 acres of land enrolled in the Present-Use Value program in Rutherford County. In order from greatest acreage to least acreage, this includes 48,217.58 acres of forestry, 40,508.38 acres of agriculture, 181.18 acres of horticulture, and 154.41 acres are enrolled in PUV but remain unclassified.

Economic Benefits

Since 2007, agricultural production in Rutherford County has skyrocketed. As shown in Table 3, the market value of all agricultural products sold in Rutherford increased nearly sixfold between 2007 and 2017, increasing from \$6,590,000 to \$45,440,000. This growth contributed to an increase in the average net farm income, reaching approximately \$25,000 in 2017. Given the economic boom in Rutherford's ag sector, by 2017 the county had the fourth highest market value of all agricultural products sold in Western North Carolina, following Burke, Henderson, and Buncombe Counties.

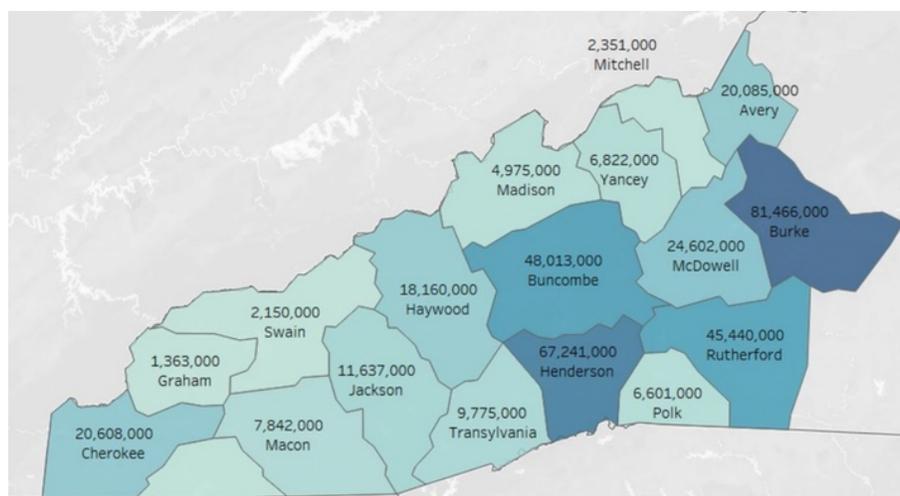


Figure 3. Market Value of Agricultural Products Sold in WNC

Table 2. Top Agricultural Items by Value in 2017

Top Crop Items	Sales (\$1,000)
Other Crops and hay	1,320
Grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas	822
Nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, sod	815
Vegetables, melons, potatoes, sweet potatoes	603
Fruits, tree nuts, berries	298
Top Livestock Items	Sales (\$1,000)
Poultry and eggs	38,062
Cattle and calves	2,407
Horses, ponies, mules, burros, donkeys	615
Sheep, goats, wool, mohair, milk	67
Other animals and animal products	39

Table 2 lists the top crop and livestock items by value in Rutherford County in 2017. "Other crops and hay" and "grains, oilseeds, dry beans, dry peas" are the leading crops in terms of value. Poultry, including broilers and layers, generate the most revenue in sales, followed by cattle and calves.

Table 3. Economic Value of Agriculture in Rutherford County

	2007	2012	2017	% Change, 2007-2017
Market Value of Ag Products Sold, \$s	6,590,000	22,809,000	45,440,000	589.5
Average Market Value of Ag Products Sold per Farm, \$s	9,347	35,750	73,290	684.1
Average Net Farm Income, \$s	-4,124	3,541	25,429	716.6
Crop sales, \$s	1,453,000	3,271,000	3,857,000	165.5
Livestock, poultry, and their products sales, \$s	5,137,000	19,537,000	41,582,000	709.6

Table 3 shows that livestock and poultry sales are the main economic driver of the county's agricultural sector, accounting for nearly 91.2 percent of all sales. Following Burke County, Rutherford had the second-highest livestock market value in 2017 for Western NC. Out of the 100 North Carolina counties, Rutherford County ranked 44th in livestock market value.

Table 4. Poultry Production, 2012 vs. 2017

	2012	2017
Poultry Farms, All	98	130
Broilers Head Inventory	981,009	1,921,650
Broilers Sold, #	4,746,460	8,246,740
Layers Head Inventory	2,017	61,072
Layers Sold, #	812	58,499

More specifically, broilers, which are meat-producing chickens, and layers, which are egg-producing chickens, are the most popular livestock in the county. Combined, poultry and eggs generated approximately \$38 million in sales in 2017, roughly 83.8 percent of all farm revenue in the county. Within Rutherford County, there was a 32.7 percent increase in poultry farms between 2012 and 2017, totaling 130 farms. These farms produced approximately 2 million broilers and 61,000 layers in 2017.

While production is on a smaller scale, the value of non-poultry items within Rutherford increased by 165 percent over 10 years. Crops sales in 2017 comprised approximately 8.5 percent of the county's agricultural market value, equaling \$3,857,000.



In 2017, the leading crop in terms of acreage and sales was hay; across 293 farms, 10,520 acres were used for all hay, haylage, grass silage, and greenchop. Hay and other crops produced \$1,320,000 in 2017, an increase of 17 percent since 2012. Hay producers continue to play a vital role in feeding livestock, and subsequently the population.

Within North Carolina, soybeans have the largest footprint of any crop, averaging 1.6 million acres a year. They consistently remain in the top five agricultural commodities for the state, in part due to their complementary and versatile nature. Within Rutherford, soybeans were the second most cultivated crop in 2017, with 15 farms responsible for harvesting approximately 1,808 acres of soybeans. These farmers produced 67,851 bushels of soybeans in 2017, roughly 43,000 more bushels than in 2012. While Rutherford soybean production is a small fraction of the larger soybean economy, this crop generated \$645,000 in sales in 2017. This large portion explains why the category of "grains, oil seeds, dry beans, and dry peas" was the second-highest crop revenue stream for Rutherford in 2017, generating \$822,000 in sales.



Corn that is grown for grain has the third-largest acreage in Rutherford county. While the number of farms growing corn decreased from 21 in 2012 to 18 in 2017, the number of acres in production remained consistent. Over this five-year period, the number of bushels produced on 390 acres increased by 60 percent to reach 48,465 bushels.

Since Rutherford County lies in USDA Hardiness Zones 6b, 7a, and 7b, it enjoys a relatively temperate climate that allows for an assortment of trees, shrubs, and plants to thrive.

As a result, nurseries, greenhouses, and floriculture farms have experienced great success in the county, generating \$815,000 in sales in 2017. In 2017, 14 farms grew nursery stock; this includes all trees, shrubs, ornamental plants, grass sod, foliage plants, or marsh plants grown or propagated for sale or distribution. These farms generated approximately \$740,840 in sales. These family-owned operations continue to grow a variety of herbs, perennials, annuals, vegetable transplants, hanging baskets, and ornamentals.

Out of all 620 farms in the county, only 56 were responsible for growing vegetables, melons, potatoes, and sweet potatoes in 2017. Together, these farms harvested 165 acres of produce, resulting in over \$603,000 in sales. Pumpkins were the leading crop in terms of acreage, comprising approximately 22 acres in 2017. Pumpkins were closely followed by tomatoes at 21 acres, which experienced a 47.5 percent decrease in production after 2012. Sweet corn and sweet potatoes both comprised approximately 20 acres of land in 2017, with bush and pole-type snap beans following at 8 acres.



Photo from Way of Life Farm



Photo from Seven Oaks Farm

Fruits, berries, and tree nuts resulted in \$298,000 in sales in 2017, a 22 percent increase since 2012. As a result, Rutherford County was ranked 38th in the state in terms of revenue for this category. Not including berry production, there were 23 farms growing noncitrus fruits across 67 acres in 2017. The top cultivated fruits include grapes (12 farms, 12 acres), pears (10 farms, 3 acres), and apples (8 farms, 2 acres). Additionally, the following berry varieties were grown in the county: blackberries, dewberries, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries. In 2017, there were only 4 farms growing nuts, including chestnuts and pecans.

Forestry is a major aspect of the agricultural economy in Rutherford County. In 2020, there were about 204,861 acres of forest in the county, of which approximately 187,504 acres were privately owned. In fact, NCSU Forestry Extension Service estimates that over half of all land in the county, about 51.7 percent, is private timberland. In 2020, landowners in the county received an estimated stumpage harvest value of \$2.6 million, a decrease of \$2.7 million from 2018 reports. Overall, the forest sector in the county, including forestry, logging, and forest product industries, had a total economic contribution of approximately \$265 million in industrial output to the county's economy, supporting about 1,336 total jobs with a payroll of about \$56 million.



Farm Statistics and Trends

Table 5 summarizes figures on farm size and value for 2007, 2012, and 2017. During the ten year period between 2007 and 2017, the number of farms within Rutherford County decreased from 705 to 620 farms, a decline of 12.1 percent. Simultaneously, the total area of land in farms decreased by 9 percent, totaling approximately 5,977 acres of land lost. Despite this loss of land, the median farm size, where half the farms are larger and half are smaller, remained fairly consistent around the 50-acre mark. Additionally, the average size of farms increased from 93 acres to 97 acres, offsetting the decline in the number of farms.

Notably, between 2007 and 2017, 69 farms smaller than 50 acres ceased operations. While there was a subtle decline in the number of mid-size and large-scale farms, these operations remained fairly steady compared to farms with less than 50 acres. The decline in small farming operations coincides with the 2008 economic recession, which sharply lowered agricultural prices and farm income. While large-scale, more secure farms may have taken a financial hit, it likely pushed small farmers out of business. Despite the reduction in farms, the average value of land and buildings per farm increased between 2007 and 2017. In 2012, there was an initial reduction in value, but by 2017 farms rebounded from the economic turmoil and exceeded 2007 valuations.

Table 5. Farm Statistics

	2007	2012	2017	Change between 2007-2017
Number of Farms	705	638	620	-12.1 %
Land in Farms (acres)	65,898	59,540	59,921	-9.1 %
Average Farm Size (acres)	93	93	97	4.3 acres
Median Farm Size (acres)	50	45	51	1 acre
Average Value of Land and Buildings (per farm)	410,058	376,524	462,120	12.7%
Farms Less than 50 Acres	352	328	289	-17.9 %
Farms 50 to 179 Acres	258	222	245	-5 %
Farms Over 179 Acres	95	88	82	-13.7 %

Table 6 shows the distribution of farms by annual revenue in 2007, 2012, and 2017. It is clear that farms have become increasingly more profitable, as a portion of them have moved from the \$10,000 to \$49,000 annual income range to a range that exceeds \$50,000 in annual income. The decrease in the number of total farms in the county may have led to the consolidation of farms into larger operations. Hence, the number of farms making between \$50,000 to \$99,999 has nearly quadrupled over 10 years. Similarly, the number of farms with an annual income exceeding \$100,000 has increased sixfold. On a smaller scale, the number of farms making less than \$2,500 decreased, while the number of farms making between \$2,500 and \$9,999 increased, which suggests that some farms might have increased production and moved into a new income bracket.

Table 6. Distribution of Farms by Income

	2007	2012	2017	Change in Number of Farms from 2007 to 2017
Less than \$2,500	418	312	239	-179
\$2,500 to \$9,999	158	181	219	61
\$10,000 to \$24,999	77	77	65	-12
\$25,000 to \$49,999	37	27	26	-11
\$50,000 to \$99,999	7	16	25	18
\$100,000 or more	8	25	46	38

Farm Operators

In 2017, Rutherford County had 972 total producers, a small decrease from 2012, which estimated 1,011 farmers. According to the 2017 reports, there were 539 operators with farming as their secondary occupation, compared to 430 operators pursuing farming full-time. Given that approximately 75 percent (458 of 620) of farms in Rutherford County made less than \$9,999 in 2017 income, it is unsurprising that over half of all producers listed farming as their secondary occupation. While more producers still consider farming their second job, between 2007 and 2017 the number of operators that listed farming as their primary job increased by 67.3 percent.

Over the past 10 years, the average farmer age has consistently remained in the high 50's, with 58.6 years being the average age of Rutherford farmers in 2017. The trend of an older farmer population is not isolated to Rutherford County, for the average farmer in the United States is 57.5 years old. However, the data reveals a growing population of young farmers in Rutherford County. In 2007, there were 25 producers that were 34 years old and younger; in 2012 there were 29 producers; and in 2017, there were 58 producers. While young farmers make up a fraction of the farmer population, they are a growing segment that demands greater support as older farmers age out of the profession.

Table 7. Farm Operators

	2007	2012	2017	% Change, 2007-2017
Total producers	958	1,011	972	1.5
Average Operator Age	57	59.6	58.6	2.8
Number of operators with farming as primary occupation	257	309	430	67.3
Number of operations with farming as secondary occupation	448	329	539	20.3
Number of new and beginning producers	270 (9 years or less)	162 (9 years or less)	259 (10 years of less)	Different Metrics

The food system does not begin and end with farmers, there are other essential processes that must occur before agricultural products can go from the field to the table. The agribusiness sector includes all the business aspects related to agriculture, from farming and ranching to processing, distribution, marketing, and finance. Value-added agriculture generally focuses on increasing the economic value of raw agricultural products through manufacturing or packaging processes. Farmers and value-added producers inextricably rely on one another; farmers depend on reliable contracts with food manufacturers and vice versa.

Within Rutherford County, there is an assortment of value-added producers and agribusinesses of all scales. The following is a non-exhaustive list of agribusinesses within the county: American MISO Company, Blue Ridge Distilling, Darby Farms, Lakeside Mills, and Wells Jenkins & Wells Fresh Meat Market & Slaughter. American MISO Company produces a variety of organic misos using domestically sourced soybeans. Blue Ridge Distilling Company is a distillery in Bostic producing single malt whiskey. On 80 acres of land in Union Mills, Darby Farm plants and grows elderberries which are used to produce elderberry syrup, which is known to boost the immune system and ease symptoms of illness. Lakeside Mills is a gristmill located in Spindale that produces flour and cornmeal products. Lastly, Wells, Jenkins, & Wells is a meat processor in Forest City.



American MISO Company



Wells, Jenkins, & Wells



Blue Ridge Distilling Company

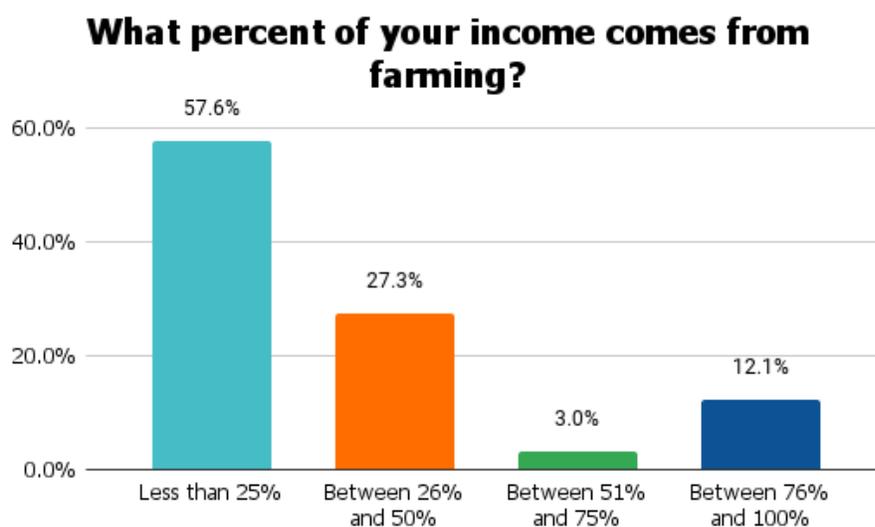


Darby Farms Elderberry Syrup

Producer Input to Farmland Preservation

From the start, a central goal of this plan was to solicit input directly from the agricultural producers and farmland owners of Rutherford County. This was accomplished through a farmer survey and one-on-one interviews with farmers that represent the diverse nature of agricultural production in the county. These results provide insight into the challenges farmers face, the types of programs most in demand from the farming community, and opportunities that can be leveraged for the health of the agricultural economy.

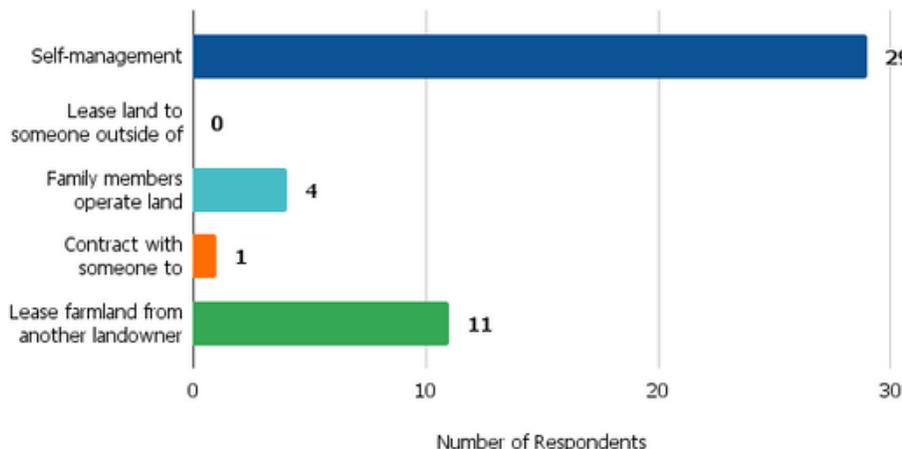
Between February 1st and March 13th, 33 Rutherford County farmers took the Rutherford County Farmer Survey. The following section provides a high-level review of the survey results.



- Two-thirds of respondents deemed farming their secondary occupation.
- Subsequently, over half of all respondents, 57.6%, indicated that less than 25 percent of their income comes from farming. Only 15.1% stated that farming generates more than 50 percent of their income.

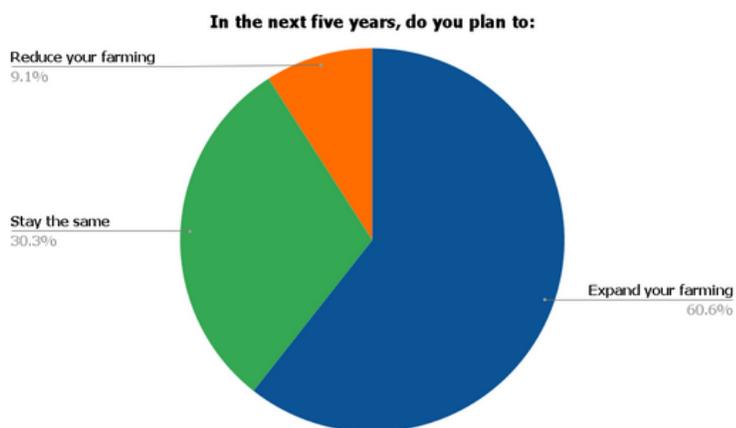
- According to the survey, the top three agricultural uses of land in Rutherford County according to the survey are 1) Cattle for beef (69.7%), 2) Hay (33.3%), and 3) Forestry (30%).
 - Only 3 of 33 respondents listed layers as one of the top uses of their land (0 listed broilers), despite the fact that poultry and eggs made up around 83.76% of all farm revenue in Rutherford County in 2017.
- Over a third of surveyed respondents (39.3%) are older than 64 years. Roughly another third (36.4%) are between the ages of 25 and 44. About 24 percent of respondents are between 45 and 64. There were no respondents under 25 years old.
- There are more first-generation farmers than 2nd, 4th, or 5th-generation farmers in the county. Third-generation farmers are the most prevalent in the county, comprising about 30.3% of the farmer population.
- Over half of all respondents (54.6%) have had land in their family for over 50 years, highlighting the generational ties to farming in the county.

How is the land in agriculture/forestry production in Rutherford County managed? Select all that apply.



- 29 of 33 respondents (87.9%) self-manage their land; of those respondents, 10 indicate that they also lease additional farmland from a landowner. Of the 11 total respondents that lease land from a landowner, only one respondent solely leases land. Five of the 11 respondents that lease are between 25 and 34, which suggests that leases

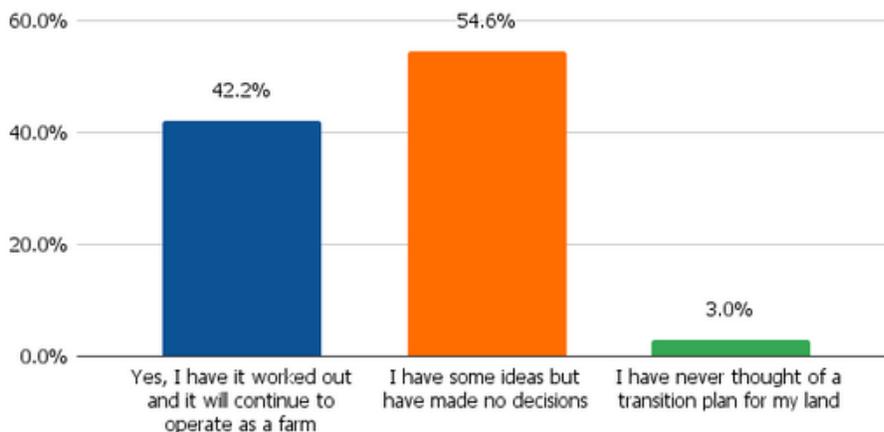
are a practical way to expand an operation when you are a new or beginning farmer. Additionally, one respondent self-manages land, leases additional land, and contracts with someone to manage land on their behalf. Four respondents maintain their land with the help of their family members.



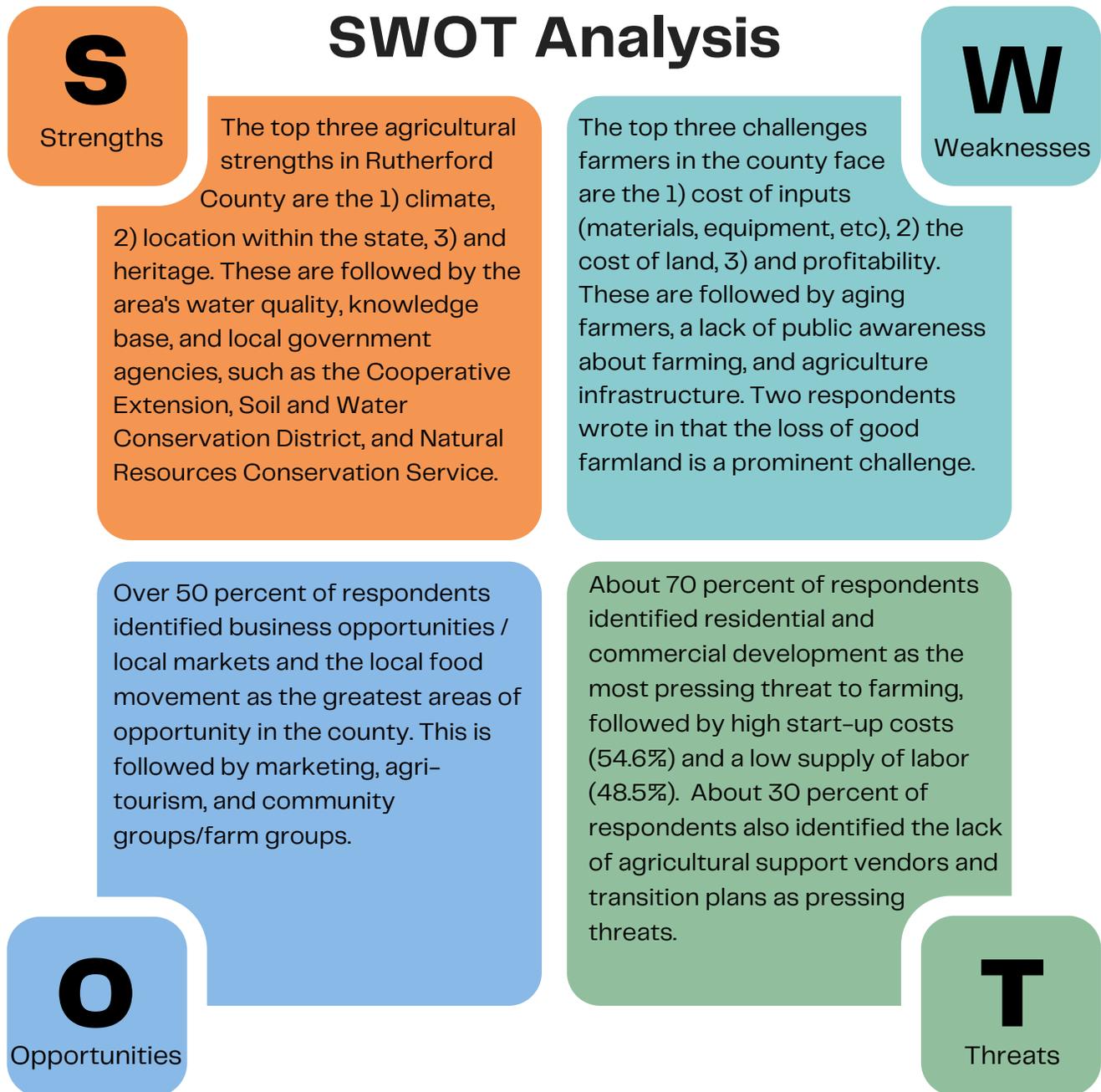
- In the next five years, about 60 percent of farmers plan to expand their farming operations. In contrast, 30 percent of farmers expect their operations to stay the same, and only 9 percent intend to reduce their operations.

- The majority of respondents, 55 percent, have considered implementing a succession plan for their land, but have made no official decisions. About 42 percent of respondents said they have a transition plan in place and their land will continue to operate as a farm. Only one respondent has never thought of a transition plan.

Do you have a transition plan for what will happen to your land after you pass?

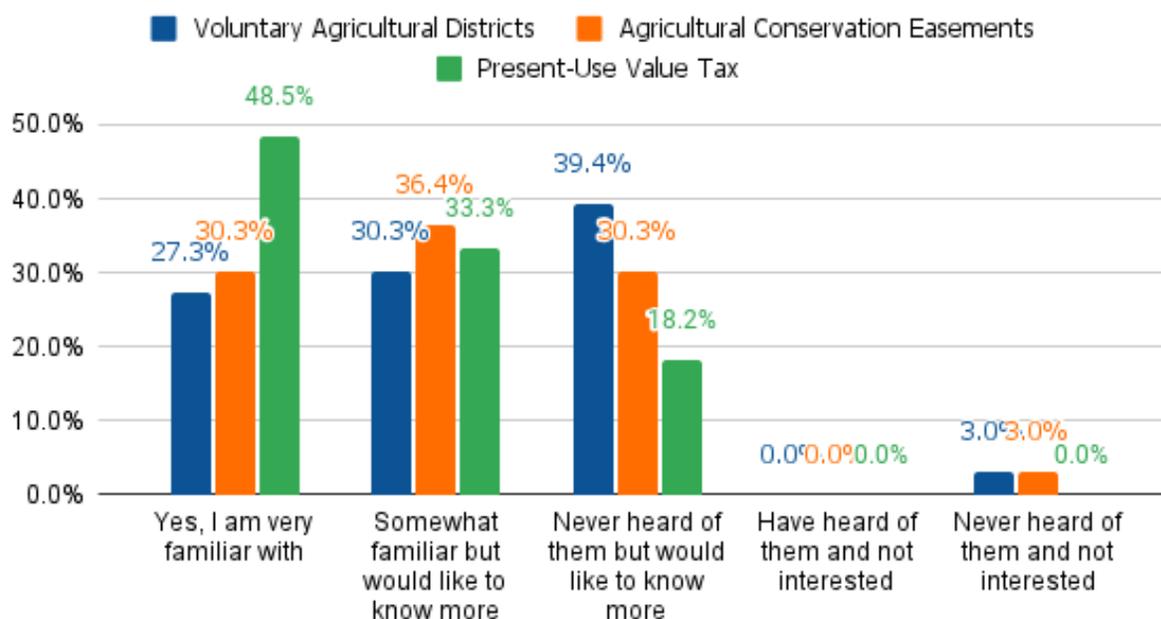


- Over three-quarters of the respondents, 87.8 percent, believe it is important that their land operates as farmland after they pass, indicating a desire amongst farmers to preserve agriculture in the county. Despite these wishes, less than half of the respondents have established a transition plan to ensure their land remains in agricultural production.



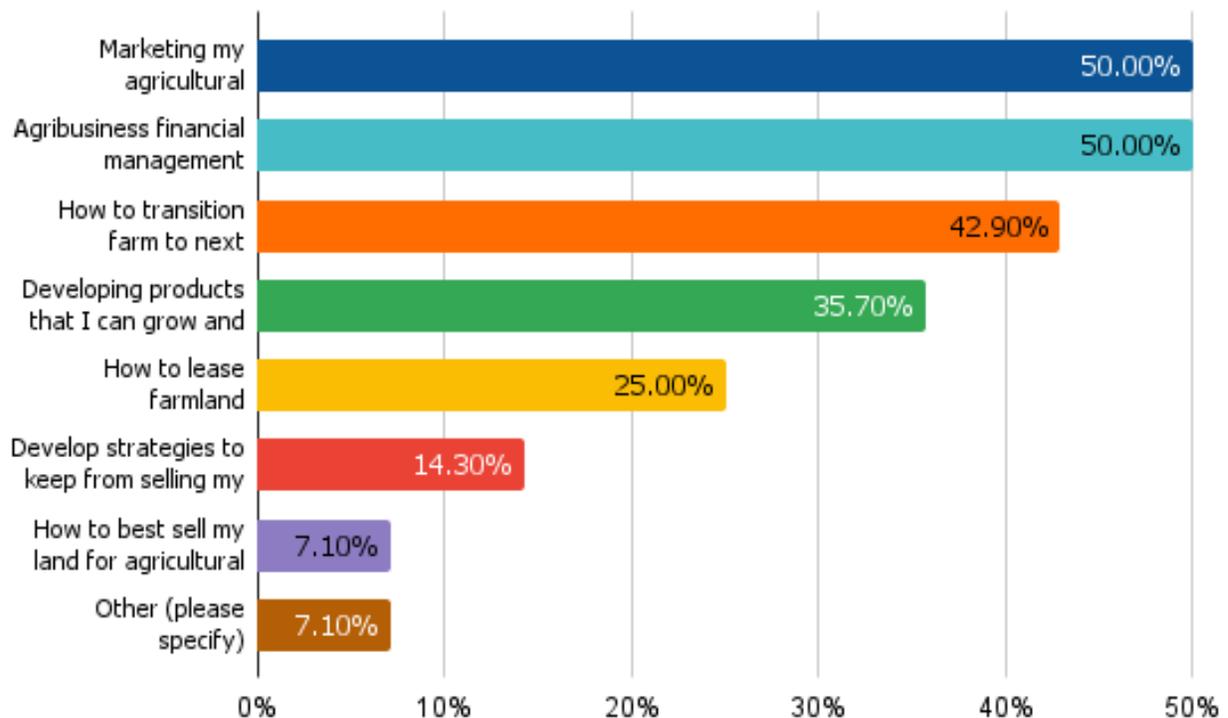
- Rutherford County farmers are familiar with a broad range of programs and services. The three most familiar programs or services are Cooperative Extension Services (93.9%), NC Agriculture Cost-Share Program through Rutherford Soil and Water (69.7%), and the USDA National Resource Conservation Service conservation planning and programs (66.6%). About 60 percent of respondents are familiar with both the USDA Farm Service Agency and the NC Forest Service.

How familiar are you with the following programs?



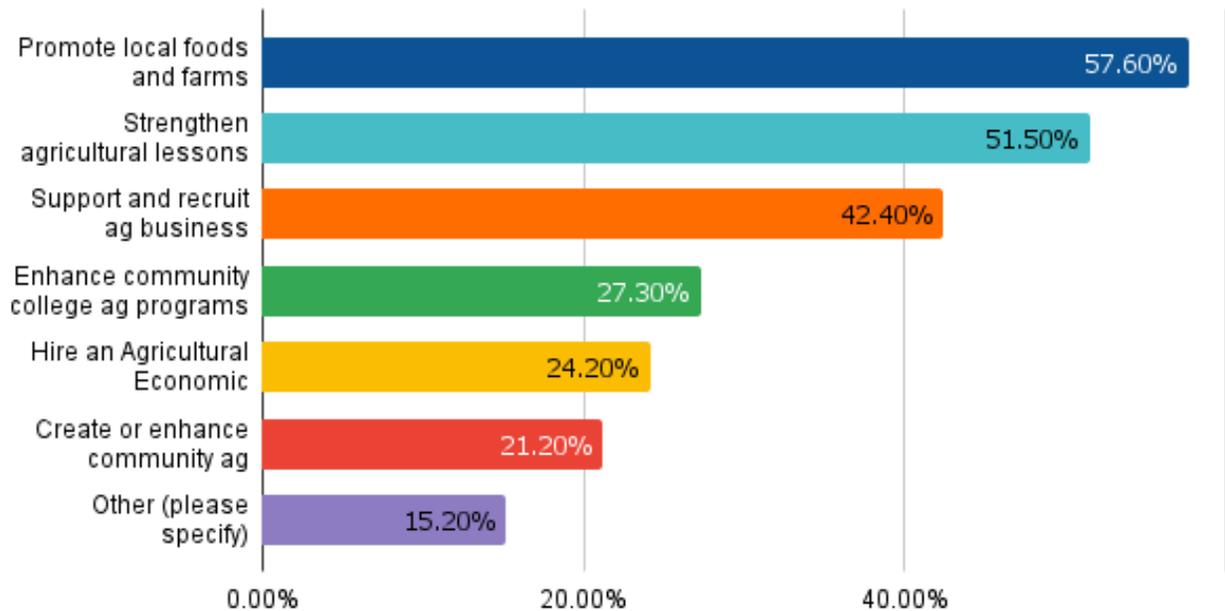
- 27.3 percent of respondents are very familiar with the Voluntary Agricultural Districts program, whereas 30.3 percent said they are aware but would like to know more. On the contrary, about 40 percent of respondents said they had never heard of the program but are interested in learning more.
- About 30 percent of respondents said they were very familiar with agricultural conservation easements. Of the 66 percent of respondents on the spectrum of being somewhat familiar or completely unfamiliar with conservation easements, all of them are interested in learning more.
- Nearly half of all respondents are very familiar with the Present-Use Value Tax program, while about a third are aware but interested in more information, and 18 percent have never heard of it but are interested in more information. Despite this being a fairly popular program, over 50 percent of respondents are interested in more information.

Would you like to know more about any of the following? Select all that apply.



- Rutherford County farmers are most interested in learning how to market their agriculture production and how to manage the financials of their agribusiness. About half of the respondents are interested in how to transition their farms from one generation to the next, which corresponds with the 54.5 percent of farmers that have thought about farm transition plans but have made no decisions. About 35.7 percent of farmers are interested in learning more about developing products they can grow and sell, which subsequently addresses the challenge of profitability.
- Interestingly, about 27 percent of farmers want to know more about either leasing their land or selling their land for agricultural use. This is salient given that high land costs are initial barriers to entry for new and beginning farmers.
- Other responses include learning more about how our leaders can influence the farm economy.

Which activities do you recommend the county engage in to help preserve agriculture and farmland in Rutherford County?



- Most respondents recommend the county engage in the promotion of local food and farms. The next two most popular recommendations for preserving farmland include strengthening agricultural lessons in K-12 schools (51.5%) and supporting and recruiting agricultural businesses (42.4%). Similarly, over a quarter of respondents would like to see the community college agriculture programs strengthened, which demonstrates a consensus around fostering interest in agriculture amongst the younger generations as a means to preserve farmland.
- 24.2 percent of respondents would like to see the county hire an agricultural economic development director, a position that could enhance connections throughout the farming community and support the attraction and retention of agribusinesses in the county.
- Other responses include: reducing taxes on farmland, which relates to the demand for greater education on the PUV program; supporting farmers against anti-farming forces; assisting with lime and fertilizer costs; stopping the focus on economic development through tourism, industrial growth, and housing, which reverberates the fear of losing prime farmland; and establishing programs that aid in farmland succession by connecting aging farmers with individuals looking to begin a career in farming.

Farmer Profiles

Six farmers and one agribusiness owner offered their insights about the state of farming in Rutherford County, which helped inform the creation of this plan. The following profiles highlight their livelihoods and the diverse operations that makeup Rutherford's farming community.

NORMAN & CAROLE MCDANIEL



Norman McDaniel comes from a multi-generational farming family and was raised in a farming community his entire life. Having grown up with his father producing cotton, Norman always aspired to farm full-time, but he was unable to afford his dream until later in life. Until then, Norman spent 13 years as a barber and then 25 years as a classroom teacher. His wife, Carole, spent 5 years as a librarian and 25 years as a school administrator and Executive Director of a non-profit. After dedicating 40 years to their professions, they were comfortable committing to farming as their sole occupation. Both Norman and Carole stressed that it was crucial they had other sources of income before starting their farming operation. Currently, Norman and Carole own 700 acres that they have both purchased and inherited. Within this acreage, they have 264 acres in forestry, a little over 100 acres in row crops, and 100 acres for cattle. They currently don't have a transition plan established for their farm, but they are hoping to develop a strategy in the coming year.

BOB YOUNG

About twenty five years ago, Bob Young bought a piece of land out in Greenhill. Upon purchase, his newly acquired fields were in disarray and the soil was devoid of nutrients. After much investment and time, including introducing tons of compost and installing a pond, Bob formed Deer Valley Farm. Today, Bob raises rainbow trout purchased from Cantrell Creek Trout Farm. Upon reaching their desired size, he processes and packages the fish in-house and sells a variety of frozen fillets and smoked products at markets throughout the region. In years past, Bob successfully operated a vegetable farm. Across 10 acres of land, he grew an assortment of produce in raised beds and hoop houses. Through a partnership with the Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District, he was able to install a well for irrigation and a hoop house, which greatly lengthened his growing season.



CJ HIGGINS



CJ is a young farmer in Rutherford County that works alongside her parents to operate C-Saw Hill Farm, a dairy farm. CJ's parents decided to start farming when CJ got salmonella from a fast food restaurant at a young age. They decided to focus their attention on raising dairy cattle, which allows them to sell raw milk and ice cream. They also own pigs and beef cattle, which they take to Wells, Jenkins, & Wells, a local processor. Their current operation takes place on two 50-acre and 30-acre pastures. They mainly sell their dairy products to local stores within the county, such as Wells, Jenkins, & Wells, Main Street Market, Cherry Mountain General Store, and Washburn's General Store. CJ also has an interest in showing dairy cows, which she started doing when she was 7. She currently owns 8 cows on her own that she's either purchased or have been born on the farm.

ERICA FERNBACH

Erica Fernbach is a young farmer who works alongside her boyfriend Karl Brandstaetter at their farm, Seven Oaks Farm, in the Sunshine community of Rutherford County. Erica studied crop and soil science in college and began interning on farms after graduation. She worked in California and all over the west coast before moving to Burke County, where she worked for four years. Through this experience, she met Jeff and Katie Belflower, along with her boyfriend Karl. Erica and Karl lease one acre of farmland from the Belflowers and grow 40 varieties of row crops throughout the year. Seven Oaks Farm is certified naturally grown so they don't spray or use any synthetic fertilizer on their crops. They also utilize minimal tillage techniques that focus on improving the land and yield sizes. They mainly sell their products through direct markets such as the Rutherford County Farmers Market and the Hub City Market in Spartanburg.



GUY FAGAN



For 15 years after high school Guy Fagan worked as a welder on gas lines. In 2015, he transitioned away from this job to pursue farming full-time on a 53-acre parcel of land his grandfather once owned. At first, he started small, only selling two to three boxes of tomatoes a week. Now, going on his 8th year of farming in Ellenboro, he has scaled up his production to sell by the pallet. Fagan's Farm sells an arrangement of fresh, organic vegetables, including tomatoes, beans, pumpkins, squash, and more, through two main channels. The majority of his produce is sold wholesale to a buyer out of Virginia, and the remaining portions are sold at his brick-and-mortar farm store in Ellenboro. He also sells canned goods, local honey, fresh flowers, and locally grown cattle and pork.

SARAH JANE DAVIS

Sarah Jane Davis and her husband Jamie Davis formed Way of Life farm in the Bostic community nearly 14 years ago. Sarah Jane and Jamie met while studying environmental studies in college. Given their shared appreciation for natural systems, they decided to start a 2-acre, intensive farm that puts environmental stewardship and healthy, organic food at the center of its operation. At Way of Life Farm, Sarah Jane and Jamie grow USDA Certified Organic and Real Organic Certified produce utilizing no-till methods and cover crops. They also raise pigs on pasture and woodland to produce an array of pork products. Today, Way of Life sells its products through three main channels, including a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model, wholesale to the Foothills Food Hub, and direct to consumers at the Charlotte Regional Farmers Market.



BRYAN KING



Bryan King is a fourth-generation miller at LakeSide Mills, a gristmill located in Spindale, NC. LakeSide Mills was founded in 1736 by the first governor of North Carolina, making it one of the oldest mills in the state. The King family purchased the mill in 1929, and it has remained in the family since. Lakeside purchases the finest white corn grown in central NC and mills it into an assortment of products, including grits, corn meal, flour, chicken and seafood breader, pancake mix, and hushpuppy mix. These products are sold under various brands, shipped to distribution warehouses, then sold at some of the largest grocery stores across the US, including Publix, Food Lion, and Ingles.

Challenges to Agriculture

01

Profitability

Many farmers in the county are required to work full-time jobs in addition to farming in order to guarantee a stable income. This results in less time spent farming but generates more income to invest in their business. Agriculture's low-profit margins also create barriers to entry for new farmers looking to start an agribusiness. Beginning farmers face high upfront capital investments, that result in immense debts and little profit for several years. This imbalance ultimately creates issues with recruiting a new generation of farmers and sustaining the current farms within Rutherford County.

03

Labor Supply

The ability to employ a reliable workforce is a widespread challenge among farmers. The interest surrounding farming fluctuates frequently, which leaves a shortage of laborers that are willing to be involved. Farming labor is also prone to harmful stigmas that perpetuate the myth that manual labor is unskilled and not respectable. This mindset results in many individuals disregarding this line of work. Some farmers have participated in temporary agricultural worker programs, like the H-2A programs. Although this type of program can be effective, it is difficult to maintain due to wage and housing requirements.

02

Infrastructure Costs

Infrastructure costs can be a large financial burden for new and established farmers. In order for farms to grow, harvest, and process their products, investments in infrastructure are essential. As existing equipment ages, new technologies evolve and many farms are faced with a need for investment capital. Due to the low profitability of farming, many farmers can't afford to invest in the necessary improvements their farms may need. This lack of proper infrastructure leaves small-scale farmers at a disadvantage and results in a decrease in production and efficiency.

04

Aging Farmer Population

A threat to the long-term viability of agriculture is the lack of young people starting new operations or taking over existing ones. Currently, most farms within Rutherford County are operated by older farmers that are aging out of the profession. These farmers are reaching the age where they can no longer sustain their farming operations on their own and need a new generation to take over. This transition poses a threat to the future of agriculture as young adults are choosing lifestyles that involve less work, risk, and more income than farming.

Challenges to Agriculture

05

Population Growth & Development

The growth and expansion of communities within rural areas significantly impact the amount of available farmland. With an influx of people moving from urban to rural areas, there is an increased demand for residential, commercial, and industrial development. With this pressure to support more people, developers look to purchase prime farmland from landowners without a transition plan. This situation ultimately results in less available farmland for new farmers to acquire and for existing operations to expand into.

07

Lack of Ag Support Vendors

According to the survey, many farmers are concerned about an insufficient amount of ag support within the county. This support falls short within distribution networks and agribusiness connections that can be used to strengthen the food system in Rutherford. Many farmers expressed a need for more local outlets that were able to support local farms with product distribution and processing. Without the expansion and retention of new and existing agribusinesses within the county, farmers are compelled to look outside of the county for support.

06

Weak Local Markets

Growth in agriculture requires sustainable markets that can support local farmers and attract customers. Within Rutherford County, the availability of these markets is limited and the quality is subpar compared to surrounding areas. For instance, the Rutherford County winter farmers market is held indoors at the Woodrow W. Jones Community Hall, which has limited space for weekly vendors and consumers. As a result, farmers are forced to travel out of the county to sell the quantities needed to sustain their business. To address this issue, awareness and support for existing markets must grow as a way to encourage consumers to shop directly from local farmers. In turn, greater community buy-in will incentivize local growers to pursue direct-to-consumer marketing channels like local farmers markets.

Strengths and Opportunities for Agriculture

01

Location

Rutherford County is located in the foothills of Western North Carolina, which contributes to its moderate climate and appealing living conditions. It is also located within the isothermal belt, a phenomenon that protects the foothills from frost and freezing temperatures, which contributes to a longer growing season. Additionally, Rutherford County is in close proximity to several major metropolitan areas such as Asheville and Charlotte, North Carolina, and Greenville and Spartanburg, South Carolina. This centralized location allows farmers within the region to expand their marketing channels and sell their products to a larger customer base that prioritizes local or regional products. Utilizing this opportunity and marketing local producers will help support the economic health of agribusinesses in Rutherford county.



02

Knowledgeable Farmers

Although the local farmer demographics represent a senior group of agriculture producers, these established farmers are able to provide an abundance of knowledge about agricultural processes. These farmers possess a deep connection to the surrounding land that has been passed down through generations. The heritage that many locals share with agriculture has created a wealth of local technical knowledge specific to the terrain. Within Rutherford County, there are several networking events that support the sharing of this knowledge and the establishment of relationships. One example is the Farm Bureau Breakfast where farmers, ranchers, and friends of agriculture in Rutherford County meet for fellowship and agricultural education. Another organization that supports networking events is the Rutherford County Cooperative Extension which hosts projects, workshops, and community involvement programs. Through events like these, farmers are able to connect and establish communication hubs that can be used to spread knowledge and guidance to all types of farmers.

Strengths and Opportunities for Agriculture

03

Local Government Agencies

Within Rutherford County, there are multiple entities that offer technical assistance and support to local farmers. For instance, the Rutherford County Center operates as a local N.C. Cooperative Extension office. The staff at the center offer a range of services, including grant assistance, workshops, and access to research-based information. The center is also responsible for 4-H Youth Development and the Foothills Farm Tour, which combined, cultivate an increased understanding and appreciation for agriculture amongst the youth and the general public.

Additionally, the Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) provides various financial, technical, and educational assistance to landowners and farmers in the county. Within the SWCD, the NC Agriculture Cost Share Program (ACSP), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) work together to address agricultural conservation. These agencies promote resource management and conservation on private lands through voluntary, incentive-based programs. For example, these entities have programs in place that provide landowners with financial assistance for infrastructure construction, restoration from natural disasters, and environmental stewardship.

These agencies are a great strength to Rutherford County agriculture, but they are not being utilized to their full potential. To increase awareness and utilization of services, there is potential for more consistent communication between the agencies and Rutherford County farmers.



Strengths and Opportunities for Agriculture

04

Young Farmers

Young farmers are a vital component of the agricultural community and seem to be a growing population within Rutherford County. There are many new farmers, particularly young couples, that have begun small farming businesses within the county. These young adults have an interest in agriculture and possess new mindsets about how farming should be handled. Many new farmers are adopting organic growing methods along with sustainable practices that prioritize the health of the soil and land. This type of farming invests in the quality of land and works to ensure its long-term viability, which is in itself an act of farmland preservation. However, the main obstacle young farmers encounter is the upfront costs associated with starting a farming operation. The exorbitant costs of land and its lack of availability pose challenges to those looking to venture into agriculture. With this in mind, many new farmers have opted to rent farmland rather than purchase it. Through this strategy, young farmers are able to connect with established farmers and engage in knowledge sharing. Through this system, transition planning can be accomplished, and a new generation of farmers can be supported.



05

Local Food and Marketing Channels

In recent years the local food movement in Rutherford County has gained momentum as more people have become concerned with the environmental and social repercussions of agriculture. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the globalized food system and turned consumers' attention and dollars toward local growers. This increased demand for local, sustainably grown food has allowed small-scale farms to increase their direct-to-consumer sales channels through farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture programs, and online orders. Within Rutherford County, existing farmers markets have a decent amount of basic infrastructure in place necessary to host weekly events, but additional investments in brick-and-mortar facilities and increased marketing efforts would take these markets to the next level. Additionally, the increased demand and attention on local food has opened the door for additional partnerships between local growers and restaurants, grocery stores, and value-added producers.

Farmland Protection Programs

Present-Use Value Tax Program

Present-Use Value, or PUV, is a program established in 1973 by N.C.G.S. §§ 105-277.2 to .7 and administered by the county assessor. Through PUV, qualifying property can be taxed based on soil quality and active use as agricultural, horticultural or forest land rather than for its highest and best use. The objective of the program is to keep the family farm in the hands of the family farmer. The NC Use-Value Advisory Board sets the assessment schedule based on the rent a parcel could receive given its soils and its use for agriculture or horticulture. Assessment schedules for forest land are based on the present worth of a future timber harvest. Qualifying property is assessed at its present-use value rather than its market value. Deferred taxes are the difference between the taxes due at market value and the taxes due at the present-use value. Deferred taxes for the current year plus the previous three years will become due and payable with interest when a property loses its eligibility in the present-use value program.

• Basic Requirements

- Minimum acreage of production land:
 - 10 acres for agricultural use.
 - 5 acres for horticulture use.
 - 20 acres for forest use.
 - Production must follow a sound management plan.
 - Agricultural and horticultural land must have at least one qualifying tract that has produced an average gross income of at least \$1,000 for the 3 years preceding the application year.
 - Forest land use must follow a forest management plan.

• Benefits

- Protection from increasing market values, which are based on a property's "highest and best" use, and the resulting increase in property taxes.

• Current Enrollment

- 89,786.66 total acres enrolled
- 48,217.58 acres classified as forestland
- 40,508.38 acres of agricultural land
 - 9,958.28 acres classified as "agricultural"
 - 19,281 acres of "agriculture or forest greater than 20 acres"
 - 11,269.10 of "agriculture of forest less than 20 acres"
- 181.18 acres of horticultural land
 - 78.67 acres classified as "horticultural"
 - 102.51 acres of "horticulture or forest less than 20 acres"
- 725.11 acres classified as "wildlife conservation"
- 154.41 acres are unclassified

Voluntary Agricultural Districts

Established by N.C.G.S. §§ 106-737 to 743 and administered at the county level, Voluntary Agricultural Districts are designated areas where commercial agriculture will be encouraged and protected. The purpose of the districts is to increase identity and pride in the agricultural community, encourage the economic and financial health of agriculture, horticulture and forestry; and increase protection from non-farm development and other negative impacts on properly managed farms. The "Rutherford Voluntary Agricultural District Ordinance" establishes additional rules and requirements for Voluntary Agricultural Districts.

• Requirements

- An Agricultural Advisory Board must be established to implement the provisions of the Rutherford Voluntary Agricultural District ordinance.
- The District shall contain a minimum of 50 contiguous acres of qualified farmland; or shall contain two or more qualified farms which collectively contain a minimum of fifty (50) acres and are located within a mile of each other.
- To secure county certification as qualifying farmland a farm must:
 - Participate in Present-Use Value Tax program
 - Be certified by the Natural Resource Conservation Service as being a farm on which at least 2/3 land is on favorable growing soil or has been actively in use over the 5 previous years
 - Be managed by NRCS for erosion-control practices
 - Subject of a conservation agreement that prohibits non-farm use for at least 10 years, with exception of 3 lots
 - Be located in unincorporated areas of Rutherford county, unless the municipality allows the county to exercise the authority on its behalf

• Benefits

- Buyers are notified of tracts that are within one-half mile of a voluntary agricultural district.
- Developers of major planned unit developments will designate on preliminary development plans the existence of VADs within one-half mile of the proposed development.
- Abeyance of water and sewer assessments.
- A landowner belonging to a district is not required to connect to Rutherford County water and/or sewer systems.
- Local agricultural advisory board must hold a public hearing on the condemnation of all or part of qualifying farmland within a VAD.
- Signs identifying parcels enrolled in an agricultural district may be placed on enrolled parcels at the discretion of the owners.
- Stronger protection from nuisance suits.
- Representation by an appointed board regarding concerns about threats to the agricultural sector.

• Current Enrollment As of March 9, 2023

- Number of landowners enrolled: 60
- Number of acres enrolled: 7,977.99 acres

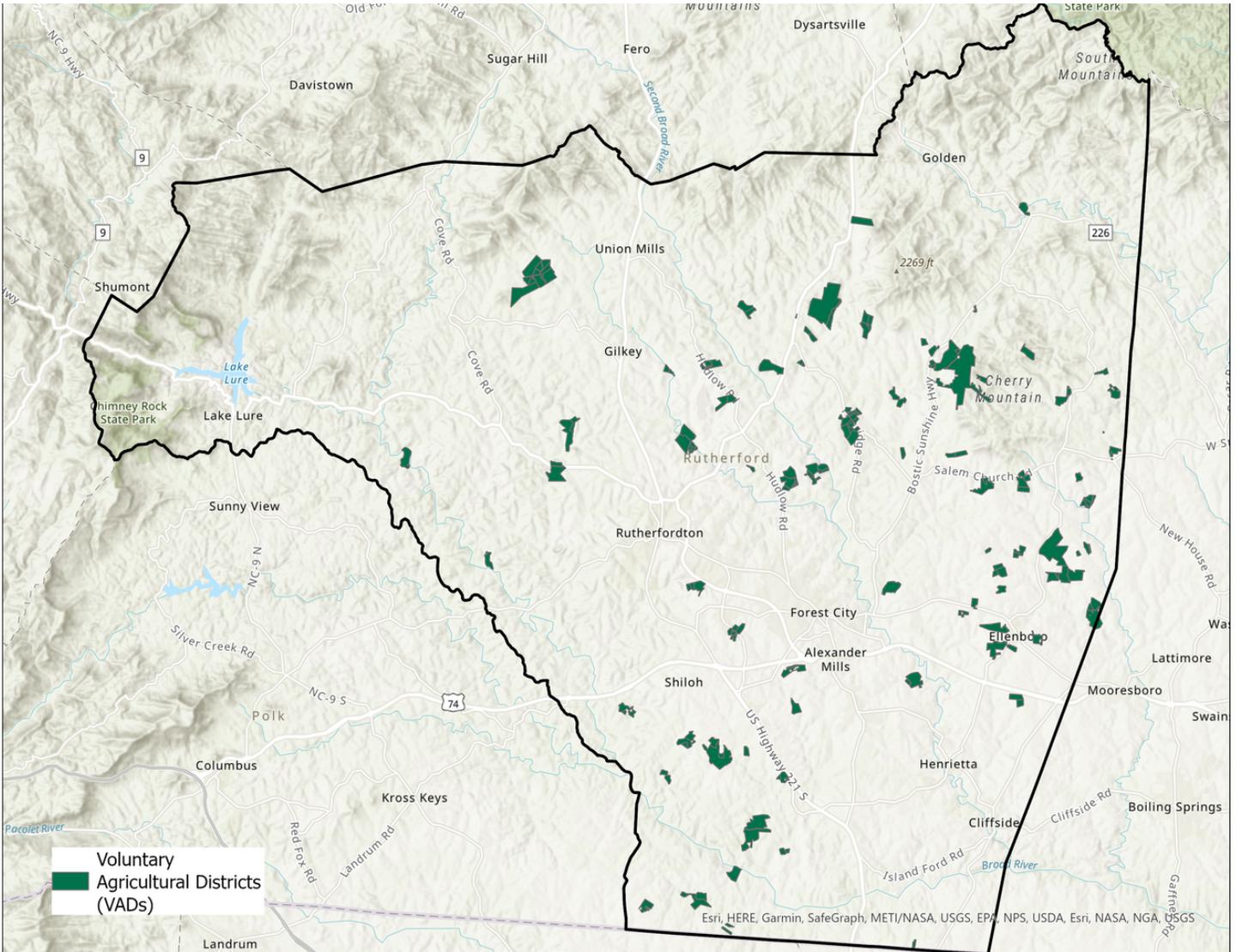


Figure 4. Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VADs) in Rutherford County

Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts

Established by N.C.G.S §§ 106-743.1 to .5, an Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural District is a VAD formed of one or more farms that are subject to an irrevocable 10-year agreement to limit development. The conservation agreement is automatically renewed for 3 years at the end of the 10-year term unless termination is given in a timely manner.

- **Benefits**

- In return for the condition of irrevocability, the landowner receives the added benefits of being able to receive 25 percent of gross revenue from the sale of non-farm products while still qualifying as a bona fide farm, and being eligible to receive up to 90 percent cost-share assistance from the Agricultural Cost Share Program.
 - Operations can bring in and process any amount of a product not grown on the operation if the final product is recognized by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services as a “Goodness Grows in North Carolina Product.” This value-added processing can be considered a bona fide farm purpose that is also exempt from county zoning. Counties may not recognize the processing of products grown off site as a bona fide farm purpose. This provision provides some additional flexibility for forestry, farm, and horticultural operations subject to a conservation agreement in the EVAD program.
 - State departments, institutions, or entities with grants are encouraged to give priority consideration to any person who farms land that is subject to a 10-year conservation agreement.
 - Waiver of assessments for utilities for farmland subject to a conservation agreement.
 - Forest landowners that also have qualifying farmland are eligible to receive a higher percentage of Agriculture Cost Share Program funds.
- Rutherford County does not have an ordinance for Enhanced Voluntary Agricultural Districts.

Farm Transition Planning

Making careful plans for the transfer of ownership of farm property and assets from the current owner to the next can be enough to preserve a farm for decades. Many options are available when planning an estate or land transfer. Farm owners can increase the likelihood of a successful transition that maintains the viability of the farm by obtaining professional assistance early in the process. The NC Farm Transition Network provides educational and technical resources to professionals and landowners.

NC State Extension provides support for farm transition and legacy planning through NC FarmLink. Their website lists educational publications addressing the transfer and management of farm and forest land, experts and organizations for farm management, and beginning steps.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a written agreement between a landowner and a qualified conservation organization or public agency under which a landowner may agree to keep the land available for agriculture and to restrict subdivision, non-farm development and other uses that are incompatible with commercial agriculture.

• General Information

- Permanently foregoing the right to subdivide or develop the land being conserved. There will be other limitations on activities to preserve the land's productivity, environmental values and rural character.
- A portion of the property can be left out of the easement, thereby providing an area for future homes and other non-farm activities.
- Agricultural activities, including forestry, are allowed under the agreement.
- Despite the term "easement", access to the public is not provided by the agreement.
- The value of a conservation easement is determined by a licensed land appraiser and is typically between 25 percent and 75 percent of the land's market value.
- A periodic inspection of the property is required to ensure that development does not occur. This provision will be included in the agreement.
- The agreement attached to the title is recorded in the Rutherford County Registry and noted on the County's land records. All future landowners must comply with the terms and conditions of the agreement.

• Financial Benefits

- If the conservation easement is donated, the landowner will likely qualify for a federal income tax deduction and a state income tax credit. The value of these benefits depends on the appraised value of the easement and the income tax situation obligations of the landowner.
- A conservation easement can also be sold by the landowner through a transaction commonly referred to as a Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), or Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE). Funds to purchase a conservation easement can be raised from private and government sources. North Carolina and the federal government have programs to purchase agricultural conservation easements. Funding through these programs is very competitive and will generally amount to a percentage of the easement's value. The tax benefits described above can be claimed for any of the easement's value above the purchase price.

• Current Enrollment

- There are five conservation easements in Rutherford County through Foothills Conservancy.
 - Maple Creek farm
 - Mill Creek Farm
 - Big Camp Creek
 - Riverbend
 - Calton Family Farm

NC Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund

N.C.G.S. § 106-744(c) established a trust fund to be administered by the Commissioner of Agriculture. The trust fund encourages the preservation of agricultural, horticultural, and forest lands. The purpose of the trust fund is to provide grant monies to purchase agricultural conservation easements, develop farmland protection plans, fund programs promoting the development and sustainability of farming, and assist in the transition of existing farms to new farm families. County governments and non-profit organizations can apply for grants for these purposes. In July of 2022, Foothills Conservancy of NC finalized a 385-acre conservation easement on the Calton Family Farm in the Sunshine Community of Rutherford County. This project was completed through a partnership with the Farmland Preservation Division of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, which administers the Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund.

Recommended Actions

Strengthen Agricultural Economy

Create an Agricultural Economic Development Director position for Rutherford County.

Researching, managing, and implementing agricultural economic development and farmland preservation programs is a full-time job. To carry out the initiatives laid out in this plan, a new Agricultural Economic Development Director position needs to be established. Creating a position dedicated to coordinating the various food system stakeholders within the county will increase the success of agricultural preservation. The duties of the agricultural economic development director include but are not limited to:

1. Communicating with agricultural stakeholders, including producers, agribusinesses, and market directors, on a regular basis to address needs.
2. Facilitating conversations between producers and agribusinesses to ensure local supply meets local demand.
3. Creating priorities, developing strategies, and meeting benchmarks for economic development efforts.
4. Locating funding opportunities for countywide agricultural economic development initiatives and for individual producers.
5. Writing and administering grants for the county and for producers as needed.
6. Developing marketing initiatives to promote local agriculture.

Continue to invest in the success of Rutherford County's farmers markets.

Rutherford County has two main farmers markets: Rutherford County Farmers Market and Lake Lure Farmer's Market. In order to ensure the success of these markets, proper marketing, promotion, and outreach should be invested in. Through these techniques, farmers markets are able to increase sales to existing customers, improve customer retention, and expand their customer base. Marketing is a key tool that is able to attract quality vendors and support the growing interest in local foods. In addition, promotions and special events can also generate excitement for local markets and can be used to maximize attendance.



Support the expansion of the Foothills Food Hub located in McDowell County.

The Foothills Food Hub is a program supported by the McDowell Local Food Advisory Council (LFAC). McDowell LFAC is a 501(c)(3) organization with the goal of improving the health, income, and livelihoods of all community members through building a complete food network of producers, businesses, agencies, and not-for-profit organizations. The Food Hub serves as an aggregation site where donated food for food pantries, including healthy fresh and frozen foods, can be delivered in bulk and stored for pickup by partner agencies and food pantries of all sizes, making it easier to get fresh, healthy food to those in need. The Foothills Food Hub currently provides a platform for local farmers from Burke County, McDowell County, and half of Rutherford County to process, package, and sell their produce in bulk. This initiative diversifies farmers' market opportunities while addressing the high levels of food insecurity within the region. The Foothills Food Hub is still in its infancy and strives to increase its food purchases from local farmers in the coming years. In order to sustain this market, local entities should partner with the Food Hub to ensure its expansion.



Increase awareness about opportunities and resources provided by local government entities.

Various farmers spoke highly of the resources provided by the local government agencies seeking to advance agriculture in the county. To ensure that more farmers are aware of the various programs that exist on a local level, the entities should collectively strengthen their marketing efforts and increase their community outreach. To improve awareness, the agencies should consider creating a marketing strategy that outlines actionable steps and realistic metrics that measure impact. For instance, the agencies could create marketing materials, such as brochures and flyers, that provide detailed information about the available programs as well as appropriate contact information. Additionally, the online presence of the agencies can be improved by adding more program information to each respective website. As for outreach, these entities can collectively create a community outreach strategy that identifies potential events, workshops, and committees that will allow them to reach their target audience. The Foothills Regional Commission can assist with providing certain marketing services that will increase awareness at the community level.

Provide marketing assistance and support to farmers and agribusinesses.

In farming, the production of crops or livestock is only one aspect of a successful business. Farmers are also responsible for promoting the value their products hold in order to solicit sales. This involves utilizing a combination of marketing tools including personal branding, digital media such as websites or social media, and print media like flyers and business cards. The survey results revealed that Rutherford County farmers are eager to learn more about ways to market their agricultural products.

To support farmers with marketing initiatives, additional training, resources, and workshops can be provided. This includes the promotion of existing statewide brands like "Got To Be NC" and regional brands like "Appalachian Grown," which is reserved for food grown on farms in Western NC and the Southern Appalachian Mountains. These brands offer packaging materials that have strong recognition and positive associations with local and sustainable agriculture, which can help farmers stand out in the market and connect with consumers who value these qualities. Additional marketing support includes connecting farmers with buyers and distributors who value these brands and developing joint marketing campaigns that highlight the unique qualities of local agriculture grown in Western North Carolina.



Protect Farmland as a Valuable Natural Resource

Review the VAD minimum acreage requirement.

In order to be considered a Voluntary Agricultural District, Rutherford County requires either 50 acres of contiguous qualified farmland, or two or more qualified farms that contain a minimum of 50 acres and are located within a mile of another. According to the latest data from the 2017 Agriculture Census, 289 farms within Rutherford county are less than 50 acres. While some of these smaller farms may qualify based on proximity to larger operations, the 50-acre minimum established by the ordinance remains a barrier to entry. Counties have their own discretion to set minimum acreage standards. With this in mind, the county should consider reducing the minimum acreage requirement to increase enrollment rates and enhance farmland preservation.

Set enrollment goals for the VAD and establish an EVAD ordinance.

As described before, the VAD serves to increase identity and pride in the agricultural community and increase protection from negative impacts on properly managed farms. The VAD also serves to organize the agricultural community by strengthening solidarity and providing a mechanism for farmers to speak with a unified voice. Adding an easily accessible VAD layer to the Rutherford County GIS map would allow farmers that do not meet the minimum 50-acre VAD requirement to determine if they are within a one-mile radius of an existing VAD and therefore eligible for VAD status. Establishing an EVAD ordinance within Rutherford County would also be beneficial since it irrevocably protects farmland from development for at least ten years. Promoting the VAD and EVAD programs, along with setting enrollment goals, will further preserve farmland in the county.

Develop a land lease recruitment program.

Currently, there is no formalized system in Rutherford County that connects existing landowners with those looking to establish a farming operation on rental land. During the interviews, farmers expressed an interest in renting parcels of their land to new and beginning farmers, but they had no knowledge of how to connect with those individuals. They also viewed this process as a way to establish succession plans and ensure their land remains in active agricultural production. In order to close this gap, a local land leasing program should be established with the intent of coordinating and facilitating connections. The local program should closely collaborate with WNC Farmlink, a regional branch of NC Farmlink that maintains databases of available farmland and farmers looking for land. In cooperation, these entities can attract more farmers to the county, ease the financial burdens associated with starting a farm, and expand farmer networks across generations.

Foster Awareness and Public Support for Agriculture

Increase awareness and support for those interested in transition planning.

To ensure the continued success of agriculture in Rutherford County, transition planning is a key tool that more farmers should be encouraged to participate in. Transition planning helps those that have no future arrangements for their land or business safeguard agricultural land so that it can continue to be farmed by future generations. Through this process, young farmers can bypass some of the barriers to farming and be given the opportunity to take over existing land when starting their own operations. In order for this tool to be utilized, local farmers should be encouraged and provided the resources to participate in this planning system. Awareness surrounding this process should be shared at local agriculture events and among organizations within the county. There should also be sources of contact that can help guide farmers through this process in order to properly establish plans that have viable futures.

Increase awareness around conservation easements through outreach.

Conservation easements are an important tool in the preservation of farmland that restricts residential, commercial, and industrial development. The purpose of these easements is to ensure that land remains in agricultural, horticultural, or forestry production. Ensuring that farmers are aware of this opportunity and the inner workings of the program is crucial in expanding easements within the county. In order to achieve this, a partnership with Foothills Conservancy, a local land trust, should be pursued. This could consist of Foothills Conservancy speaking at local agricultural events to engage and educate local farmers on how easements operate. They could also supply pamphlets or other sources of information that are easily accessible to farmers. Outreach of this type would increase the knowledge surrounding conservation easements and their subsequent benefits.



Establish an agricultural exhibit.

During the discussions with Rutherford farmers, the idea of a local agricultural exhibit was mentioned as a way to stimulate the agricultural economy and educate the public on farming. Currently, Rutherford County does not have an agricultural show, thereby forcing local farmers to travel to other communities to participate in ag events. The establishment of this display could be a partnership between the Tryon Equestrian Center, Isothermal Community College, the Cooperative Extension, and Rutherford Soil and Water. This collaborative effort would showcase the area's rich agricultural heritage, highlighting the hard work and dedication of local farmers and growers. Visitors to the exhibit would be able to learn about various crops, livestock, and agricultural practices, as well as the importance of farming and the source of the food on their plates. In addition to educational displays and exhibits, the event would also feature livestock shows that consisted of horses, cattle, pigs, and other agricultural animals. Overall, this joint effort would be a great way to promote agriculture and community engagement in Rutherford County.



Support agricultural training and education at the K-12 levels.

In Rutherford County, the average farmer is 58.6 years old. When the time comes for the older farming generation to step away from agriculture, it is essential that a new generation of farmers are equipped to fill that role. Fostering the youth's interest in agriculture and providing them with ample opportunities at a young age is essential to preserving the act of farming. Currently, all three Rutherford County public high schools, including East Rutherford High School, Chase High School, and R-S Central High School have two educators on staff teaching agricultural education courses. Chase Middle School is the only middle school in the county to offer agricultural education courses at the time. These courses focus on an array of topics, including animal science, horticulture, and agriscience. Each school has an on-site greenhouse and farming equipment, which allows students to engage in experiential learning. Additionally, each high school offers a local Future Farmers of America chapter which affords students the opportunity to explore a broad range of agricultural career pathways while developing their leadership skills. These programs have contributed to flourishing alumni networks, and have seen students gain employment in the ag industry and pursue degrees at N.C. State University and Isothermal Community College.

Some of the extracurricular activities and programs the schools used to offer through their agricultural education courses have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. To encourage students to begin thinking about agricultural education while they are in the lower grades, there is room for greater discussion about the food system as a whole. A poster contest used to occur that allowed elementary-aged students to discuss where food comes from and how it makes its way into stores. Increasing this type of interactive assignment would help younger students gain a better understanding of agriculture production within their community. Another program that could foster elementary and middle schoolers' interest in ag would be local farm and agribusiness visits. This type of experiential learning would teach children how the farming process works and allow them to meet the farmers within their community.

Along with farm visits, farmer guest lectures would provide a great opportunity for students to connect with farmers and learn about different ag operations. This personal approach would get younger students interested in farming before they enter high school and have the ability to enroll in ag courses. Lastly, increasing involvement in 4-H Youth Programs that are offered through the Cooperative Extension would equip youth with the skills and knowledge needed to advance into an agricultural occupation. These programs help foster children's interest in agriculture while giving them an outlet to explore different clubs and activities. Overall, each of these programs would strengthen agricultural training and education while also developing stronger connections between schools and local farms.

Increase awareness of the agribusiness programs and hands-on learning opportunities at Isothermal Community College.

Community colleges are essential in the creation of a skilled and hireable workforce that meets industry demand. Rutherford County is fortunate to have the Isothermal Community College (ICC) Spindale campus within its bounds. ICC currently offers a variety of agriculture-related certificates and degrees, including an Agribusiness Technology Degree with tracks in landscape horticulture, equine, and animal science; an Agribusiness/Agriculture Technology Certificate; an Equine Science Certificate; an Animal Science Certificate; and a Landscape Technology Certificate. ICC is also part of the 2+2 Program with NC A&T State University which allows individuals to transfer their associate's degree in an agricultural-related discipline into the Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Education at NC A&T.

The agribusiness programs at ICC prepare individuals for pursuing agriculture-related ventures by placing an emphasis on field training and hands-on learning. Students are required to enroll in a work-based learning course that consists of 160 hours of experience in a semester. Currently, local farmers looking to host an apprentice can contact ICC's lead agriculture instructor, who then connects them with students in need of work-based learning hours. There is no formal channel where farmers can submit requests to ICC to host an intern or apprentice. Additionally, these opportunities can be paid or unpaid, for it is up to the farmer to decide the wages.

Based on the contents of the farmer interviews and survey, there is an agricultural labor shortage throughout the county. Farmers expressed that this shortage stems from a lack of local interest and willingness to pursue farm work. The ICC agribusiness department has the potential to lessen the impacts of this issue. By formalizing the apprenticeship channel and increasing awareness about the program amongst producers in the county, both students and farmers will benefit. Students will gain valuable experience whilst forming relationships with the local farm community, and producers will be able to source labor at a cost-effective price. There is also potential for the Foothills Regional Commission Workforce Development department to utilize its workforce funding streams to reimburse wages or increase wages for apprentices.



Photos from Isothermal Community College

Form a sector partnership between industry stakeholders and key private and public entities throughout Rutherford County.

Within Rutherford County there are already a number of entities and programs in place working to strengthen the local agriculture sector by preserving farmland, aiding farmers, and inspiring the next generation of producers. While these systems are working at maximum capacity on their own, they remain siloed, thereby preventing them from collectively making the greatest impact. To truly preserve farmland and support farmers, there needs to be a greater level of cross-sector collaboration. To begin, a sector partnership between industry stakeholders and key private and public entities needs to occur. This includes representatives from but not limited to: Rutherford County, Rutherford County Soil and Water Conservation District, Isothermal Community College, Rutherford Cooperative Extension, Foothills Workforce Development Board, the Community and Economic Development department at Foothills Regional Commission, Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, Rutherford County Schools, Rutherford Tourism Development Authority, RutherfordBarn, and lastly, farmers and value-added producers in the county.

This convening would foster industry-driven alignment across economic development, workforce development, and education. Additionally, it would allow local agricultural players to learn about the existing support mechanisms in place, while providing a space for dialogue and an opportunity to set goals that align resources, people, organizations, governments, and manufacturers. This recommendation is closely intertwined with the recommendation to create a position for an Agricultural Economic Development Director. This individual will be able to use these conversations to guide their work scope and act as the missing link within the agricultural economy.



With the Foothills Regional Commission working to complete a new five-year comprehensive economic development strategy for the four-county area of Cleveland, McDowell, Polk, and Rutherford Counties, they are in a prime position to facilitate the convening of agriculture stakeholders. Given agriculture's leading role as an economic engine for the region, the impetus to ensure its survival and ability to thrive is ever-pressing.

Timeline for Implementation

Action	Short-Term	Near-Term	Long-Term
Hire an Agricultural Development Director.		✓	
Invest in the success of Rutherford County's farmers markets.		✓	
Establish an agricultural exhibit.			✓
Increase awareness about opportunities and resources provided by local government entities.	✓		
Provide marketing assistance and support to farmers and agribusinesses.		✓	
Support the expansion of the Foothills Food Hub located in McDowell County.		✓	
Review the VAD minimum acreage requirement.	✓		
Set enrollment goals for the VAD and establish an EVAD ordinance.	✓		
Develop a land lease recruitment program.			✓
Increase awareness and support for those interested in transition planning.	✓		
Increase awareness around conservation easements through outreach.	✓		
Support agricultural training and education at the K-12 levels.		✓	

Action	Short-Term	Near-Term	Long-Term
Increase awareness about opportunities and resources provided by local government entities.	✓		
Increase awareness of the agribusiness programs and hands-on learning opportunities at Isothermal Community College.	✓		
Form a sector partnership between industry stakeholders and key private and public entities throughout Rutherford County.		✓	

Funding Sources

Gold Leaf Foundation

Golden LEAF supports agriculture projects as an economic development engine. Their grants for agriculture projects have supported the development of new crops, expanded markets for agriculture products, scientific research, training for farmers, cost-effective techniques and value-added agricultural enterprises.

WNC Agricultural Options Program

The Ag Options Program helps build sustainable farming communities in our mountain region by providing resources directly to farmers who are diversifying or expanding their operations. The ultimate goal of WNC Ag Options is to protect mountain farmland by assisting the longevity of farm enterprises and encouraging groups of farmers to solve logistical challenges in the local agricultural system.

NC Tobacco Trust Fund

The North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission provides grants for a variety of projects related to the tobacco industry and its impact on the state. Specifically, the commission focuses on projects that support the economic development of rural communities that have been historically dependent on tobacco production.

USDA Farm to School

On an annual basis, USDA awards competitive Farm to School grants to be used for training, supporting operations, planning, purchasing equipment, developing school gardens, developing partnerships, and implementing farm to school programs.

NC Ag in the Classroom Going Local

Going Local Grants help educators provide Pre-K through collegiate level students with valuable, real-world education and experiences directly related to the agricultural industry and the Common Core State and Essential Standards. Teachers practicing in private and public North Carolina schools, colleges, and universities are encouraged to apply.

USDA Local Food Promotion Program

The Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) funds projects that develop, coordinate and expand local and regional food business enterprises that engage as intermediaries in indirect producer to consumer marketing to help increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products.

The America's Farmer Grow Communities Bayer Fund

The America's Farmers Grow Communities Bayer Fund program seeks to give \$5,000 grants to farming communities across rural America. They focus on a variety of STEM education efforts, Food and Nutrition, Wellness and Ag Youth initiatives in rural communities where farmers live and work.

Funding Sources

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

ARC's agricultural grants are designed to support the economic development of rural communities in the Appalachian region by promoting sustainable agriculture, local food systems, and value-added products.

The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina

This organization aims to increase opportunities for local farmers and food entrepreneurs who support the sustainability and profitability of WNC farms and address food insecurity and facilitate nutrition and healthy eating for all.

Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE)

SARE offers competitive grants to fund research and education projects that advance sustainable agricultural practices in the United States.

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP)

ASAP, through support from the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, has funds available for Appalachian Grown certified farms and farm groups in North Carolina to promote locally grown food. These funds can be used for design and production of labels, packaging, or promotional materials featuring the Appalachian Grown logo.

ACEP Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE)

NRCS provides financial assistance to eligible partners for purchasing Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) that protect the agricultural use and conservation values of eligible land. In the case of working farms, the program helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program also protects grazing uses and related conservation values by conserving grassland, including rangeland, pastureland and shrubland. Eligible partners include Indian tribes, state and local governments and non-governmental organizations that have farmland or grassland protection programs.

USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program

The Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP) funds projects that develop, coordinate and expand direct producer-to-consumer markets to help increase access to and availability of locally and regionally produced agricultural products by developing, coordinating, expanding, and providing outreach, training, and technical assistance to domestic farmers markets, roadside stands, community-supported agriculture programs, agritourism activities, online sales or other direct producer-to-consumer (including direct producer-to-retail, direct producer-to-restaurant and direct producer-to-institutional marketing) market opportunities.

Appendix A

Use the link below to view the survey questions and results. The last survey question regarding contact information is excluded from the survey results to protect respondents' identity.

https://www.surveymonkey.com/stories/SM-zvkwifLN01M9vtfsIUhwwQ_3D_3D/

Appendix B

Farmer Interview Questions

1. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you got into farming, and what farming means to you?
2. What are some internal and external challenges you've encountered while farming? (this includes costs, managing the business side, ag infrastructure, encroachment on land, etc) What impacts the success of your farm operation the most?
3. Based on these challenges, what would you like to see in effect that would be beneficial to farming in Rutherford County?
4. What are some things the county does right when it comes to supporting farmers and their operations?
5. Do you have any ideas on ways we can preserve farmland and ensure it is used for agricultural purposes in the future?
6. What can be done to support the business side of farming that would keep farms in operation?
7. What are some of the differences in the way you farm compared to other generations? How will that impact the future of farming?
8. Are you optimistic about the future of agriculture in Rutherford? What are your concerns?

Appendix C

Agribusiness Interview Questions

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your role and responsibilities at Lakeside Mills? Why did you decide to stay in the family business and what does it mean to you to carry on this tradition?
2. Can you tell us a little bit about the production process and how grain gets from the farm to your mill, to different markets?
3. What are the challenges associated with the production process, especially with the mill site located in the county?
4. Do you source from any local farmers within Rutherford County? Would you be interested in partnering with local producers?
5. How do you get your product into grocery stores? Do you encounter any challenges when partnering with large-scale vendors?
6. What do you think can be done to make Rutherford County more attractive to agri-businesses and farmers?
7. Once farmers and agribusiness settle down in Rutherford, what steps can the county or local entities like the cooperative extension/SWCD take to ensure their success?
8. What do you hope Rutherford's agriculture sector looks like in the next 10 or so years? Are you more optimistic or concerned about the future of agriculture in the county?

Appendix D

EVAD Ordinance Examples

Use the following links to access example EVAD ordinances from surrounding counties. These examples are provided as a resource for entities in the future addition of EVADs within Rutherford County.

Haywood County

<https://www.ncagr.gov/Farmlandpreservation/VAD/documents/HaywoodEnhancedSearchable.pdf>

Yancey County

<https://www.ncagr.gov/Farmlandpreservation/VAD/documents/YanceyVADOrdinance.pdf>

Henderson County

<https://www.ncagr.gov/Farmlandpreservation/VAD/documents/Henderson.pdf>

Catawba County

<https://www.ncagr.gov/Farmlandpreservation/VAD/documents/CatawbaScanned.pdf>

Buncombe County

<https://www.buncombecounty.org/common/soil/buncombe-farmland-preservation-ordinance.pdf>